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ABSTRACT

This study examined urban community college students' aspiration and degree of achievement and their responses to the items on an I-E scale to determine the relationship between their aspiration and performance and their belief about internal vs. external control of reinforcement. No values are associated with internality or externality. Approximately 800 students, grouped by sex and race, were tested in spring 1971. White male, academically successful, high educational aspirants were found to be more internal on personal control than were academically unsuccessful, low aspirants. Among black males, those high aspirants to non-traditional occupations were more external on the individual-system blame dimension than were low aspirants. Most analyses reveal no contrasts on I-E tests within separate sex-by-race groups. The conclusion shows that I-E offers little help in explaining differences between urban community college students when levels of aspiration and academic success are defined by absolute criteria. (CA)

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URBAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS' ASPIRATIONS, ACADEMIC SUCCESS AND BELIEFS IN INTERNAL-EXTERNAL CONTROL

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DAVID C. MITCHELL

Purpose

The problem of concern in the study reported here is one of contributing to the understanding of urban community college students' educational and occupational aspirations and academic success in relation to the students' beliefs about control of reinforcement. Students aspirations to education and occupations and their academic success are of importance in an urban community college setting. It may be said that they are what the college is all about. Consequently, insight into aspirations and academic success that goes beyond identification and measurement is highly desirable.

Studies among other student populations have established relationships between aspiration or performance on the one hand and belief about internal versus external control of reinforcement [I-E] on the other. Perhaps the most relevant of these to this study are Gurin's studies of students in black colleges. This study makes use of three dimensions of I-E developed by Gurin in an effort to tap distinctive belief patterns of black and white students. Such distinctive patterns, if they exist, are important because of the large proportions of black students among urban community college students.

Before proceeding with comments on the study, it must be stated

that the I-E construct has to be approached with caution in application and interpretation. There is no connotation of goodness or badness associated with either internality or externality and none is implied in this study.

Rationale

In a general way the study may be described as dealing with four propositions:

1. that the educational and occupational goals a student sets for himself may be related to his beliefs about the extent to which he and other people can influence events in their lives.
2. that how well a student is progressing toward his educational goals, as measured by his grades, may be related to the same beliefs.
3. that the separation of internal-external control into dimensions may improve understanding of the relationships between a student's aspirations and his beliefs and between a student's grades and his beliefs.
4. that in some respects black students and white students with similar aspirations and grades may have similar dimensional I-E beliefs, and that in other respects they may have different dimensional I-E beliefs.

The above propositions bear upon the problem of improving the understanding of whether and in what ways certain beliefs of students are associated with their earning higher or lower grades and with their aspiring to more or less education and to higher or lower level occupations.

Hypotheses

Four sets of hypotheses are used to study the problem. Each set

is built around a central idea about expectancies of reinforcement and aspiration or performance.

One set of three hypotheses deals with students' I-E beliefs in the personal control dimension. They consider the question of whether high level goal setting and performance traditionally valued in a Protestant-capitalist society are associated with internal orientation in the personal control dimension. It is expected that sex and race do not substantially affect the relationships between the characteristics studied and I-E belief in the personal control dimension. Consequently, these hypotheses apply to both male and female sexes and to both black and white races. Each of the three hypotheses states that students high in a given characteristic are more internal in their belief in personal control than are students low in that characteristic. The characteristics treated are:

1. aspiration to education.
2. aspiration to occupation:
    a. measured in prestige accorded occupations.
    b. measured in ability required by occupations.
3. academic success.

A second set of six hypotheses deals with white students' I-E beliefs in the control ideology and individual-system blame dimensions. Underlying these hypotheses is the idea that white students in a white-dominated culture do not experience the systematized opposition of external racial discrimination. As a result, they do not differentiate greatly among beliefs in dimensions of personal control, control ideology, and individual-system blame. Each of the hypotheses in this

set states that white students high in a given characteristic are more internal in control belief than are white students low in that characteristic. The characteristics treated are the same as those treated in the first set of hypotheses. The dependent variables in the ideological control and individual-system blame dimensions are studied separately.

A third set of hypotheses deals with differences between I-E of black and white students sharing similar aspiration and success characteristics. I-E measurements in the control ideology and individual-system blame dimensions are used. The ideas involved are that for white students the I-E construct is expected to be unitary among dimensions in its measurements of beliefs about control of reinforcement, whereas black students beliefs are expected to vary among dimensions of the construct. These patterns are expected to reflect experiential differences in exposure to systematized racial discrimination. Each of the hypotheses states that the difference in I-E belief between white students high and low in a given characteristic is greater than the difference in I-E belief between black students high and low in that characteristic. Generally, the same characteristics are studied in the control ideology and individual-system blame dimensions.

A fourth set of hypotheses deals exlusively with the I-E beliefs of black students. These hypotheses relate to the idea that black persons have certain particular expectancies about the ability to control reinforcement. These expectancies result from experiences and adjustments in a hostile culture. The nature of externality faced by blacks includes all of the external forces faced by whites plus the objective external

force of racial discrimination. For blacks, external expectancies related to racial discrimination are realistic and, hence, associated with positive performance. One aspect of this realistic appraisal is expected to affect academic performance. The black student who is aware that much required subject matter is alien or at least not relevant to blacks and that black persons who are academically successful have found ways of getting around racial bias of instructors may be described as being external in ideological control. This is the substance of one hypothesis. The other hypothesis deals with I-E belief in the individual-system blame dimension and aspirations to occupational goals which are held in high esteem by black persons but which are traditionally inaccessible to them. In this hypothesis high aspiration is associated with externality.

Design

Approximately 800 urban community college students were tested in the spring of 1970. The study instrument was administered to whole classrooms of full-time students in business, humanities, liberal arts, and natural science courses. Participation was voluntary. The instrument consists of (1) the Multidimensional Internal-External Control Scale, (2) questions related to occupational and educational aspirations, and (3) identifying and biographical data. Cumulative grade point average and number of hours attempted by each student were obtained from student records. Hours attempted are used to group students for analysis of academic success and I-E.

Independent variables are (1) educational aspirations, (2) occupational

aspirations, and (3) academic success. Occupational aspirations of all groups are analyzed in two ways, namely, according to prestige and ability requirements of occupations. Separate analyses for black students use aspirations to occupations that are nontraditional for black persons.

The dependent variables are analyzed separately from one another. Used as dependent variables are beliefs in (1) personal control, (2) ideological control, and (3) individual-system blame control.

The hypotheses are tested by one or the other of two a priori statistical analyses--one tailed t tests or analyses of variance to determine orthogonal contrasts.

The data for males and females are analyzed separately, although the hypotheses are the same for males and females. There are empirical reasons for separating the sexes. One is that patterns of educational and occupational aspiration of urban community college males differ from those of females. Another is that occupational opportunities and preferences differ for males and females.

Results

There are several instances in which students high and low in levels of aspiration and success are differentiated in internality-externality of beleif in control of reinforcement. In the three instances described below the differences are those that are hypothesized:

1. White male students who are high in aspiration to education are found to be more internal on personal control than are white male students who are low in aspiration to education.

2. Among white male students who have attempted one to eleven credit hours, those who are high in academic success are more internal on personal control than are those who are low in academic success.
3. Black male students who are high in aspiration to nontraditional occupations are more external on individual-system blame than are black male students who are low in aspiration to nontraditional occupations.

Most of the analyses reveal no significant differences in I-E between students in high and low aspiration levels or between students in high and low academic success levels.

In two instances differences in I-E that are not hypothesized are found. One such contrast reveals that black females who aspire to high prestige occupations are more external on ideological control than are black females who aspire to low prestige occupations. In another contrast, it is found that black males high in aspiration to education are more external on individual-system blame than are black males low in aspiration to education.

Discussion

The results of the study indicate that in an urban community college setting I-E offers little help in explaining differences between students high and low in aspiration and between students high and low in academic success when these characteristics are stratified by objective criteria. There are certain exceptions. The personal control beliefs of high and low level white male students are differentiated in the categories of educational aspiration and academic success. Also, the individual-system blame beliefs of black male students are differentiated on aspiration to nontraditional occupations. These, indeed, are meager

results. They preclude all but one generalization, namely, the one regarding externality in the race relevant dimension of black males aspiring to nontraditional occupations.

Several possibilities may be suggested in rationalizing the results. One possibility is that I-E may not be appropriately sensitive in this kind of a study. Another possibility is that ways of measuring I-E for this purpose need improvement. It is also possible that the criteria used in stratifying groups on independent variables are inappropriate or can stand improvement. Furthermore, it is possible that the groups within which strata are identified are homogenous. Let us examine these possibilities.

One by-product of the analyses is that in nine of ten instances black students are found to be more external on individual-system blame than are white students. This indicates that black students are more cognizant of external obstacles imposed on black people by racial discrimination than are white students. While this by-product has no bearing on the hypotheses in this study, it does establish the appropriateness of I-E in explaining differences between racial groups in the population studied.

Certain improvements in the Scale may be suggested. The thoroughness with which personal and individual-system blame beliefs are measured may be improved by the use of more items in each of these dimensions. In addition, the individual-system blame dimension may be improved by separation of <u>self</u> and <u>other</u> beliefs. One set of items can be developed to measure black students' expectancies of reinforcement of personal aspiration and performance. Another set can measure

black students' assessments of control of reinforcement by black people in general. The Scale can also benefit from regular updating of item content to improve the relevance of choices. Lack of relevancy was a frequent complaint among students tested. Regular updating would bring the choices that students make in responding to Scale items into line with current real life choices.

Some criticism of the criteria used in the study to stratify high and low level groups appears in order. The criteria used are objective and appear clearly justifiable. Certainly, graduate study beyond four years of college (the criterion for high aspiration to education) is a higher accomplishment than the completion of two years of less of college (the criterion for low aspiration to education). The same may be said of level criteria used to stratify groups on occupational aspiration and academic success. What seems to be a shortcoming is that the study is not designed to measure students' aspiration and performance factors in terms of their individual understanding of high and low criteria. For example, a given educational step, occupation, or grade that some students interpret as high may be interpreted as low by other students. The way in which a student interprets his aspiration or performance level may be a better way of identifying him with a level than the application of objective criteria.

A clue to implied similarities in I-E of students in high and low levels may be found in the homogeneity of urban community college students of a given race and sex. The greater part of the urban community college student body have not prepared for college for any appreciable time in advance of enrollment. They appear to be uncertain

of their academic and occupational potentials. These uncertainities may be reflected in uncertainty of aspirations. Attrition in the urban community college is high. More than fifty per cent of black students tested on aspirations had completed less than one quarter of study. For white males and females, corresponding proportions were more than thirty per cent and more than twenty per cent, respectively. This indicates that in very real ways sex by race groups in the population are homogenous. It is possible that the influence of homogeneity within groups makes stratification artificial.